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THE COTTON INDUSTRY—DISCUSSION

C. C. THACH: Though deposed from time to time by various economists and up-to-date agriculturists, cotton was never more of an absolute "King" than to-day. The world-wide scramble for the staple, the phenomenal leap in price to the highest mark since the years immediately succeeding the Civil War, the fierce struggle for the control of the market, the grave apprehension as to the adequacy of future supply, as to labor, as to the boll-weevil, the deterioration of seed and other pests and perils to production, the possibilities of cotton culture in regions other than the South,—these and other manifold phases of the cotton question fill the public press, and attest the vital importance of the commodity to the entire country, indeed to the entire world.

In truth, it is well-nigh impossible to overstate the supreme importance of the cotton industry in the South. As a matter of fact, cotton is the staple agricultural product of ten states in the Union, embracing a population of 18,116,000 people, or about one-fourth of the entire United States. At an average price of ten cents per pound, the crop of 10,000,000 bales as estimated by the Department of Agriculture is of tremendous financial value, aggregating the immense total of \$500,000,000. The advance since last December from eight to twelve cents a pound represents an increase to the Southern planter of \$200,000,000 over any crop that he has ever raised,—about \$80,000,000 of the increase being still to accrue upon the cotton yet in the hands of the producer.

The South is the cotton store house for the world, producing three-fourths of the world's supply. For generations to come it will hold practically a monopoly of this great product.

While I hasten to express my hearty endorsement of the main contention of the distinguished gentleman who has preceded me, yet, I ask to briefly call in question the proposition advanced "that slavery was never of any advantage in developing a system of cotton production." The question is, indeed, a long one, and is perhaps of only academic interest; yet from the stand point of economic history it is of value.

Certainly if slavery may not have been an advantage, it was the actual social condition under which the cotton raising industry was planted, fostered, and developed in America. As a social organization or machine, it was a most efficient agency for getting work done. Without the negro the development of the Southern states would have been retarded half a century or longer, at least until the great tide of immigration had flowed over the Appalachian watershed, and covered the fertile reaches of the great Northwestern territory.

Yes, the winning of the South was largely the work of the negro. Unquestionably his tropical origin, and greater immunity from malignant malarial diseases peculiarly adapted him to the severe drudgery of felling the forests, draining the marshes, and subduing to cultivation the more fertile sections of the semi-tropical country in which cotton was found to thrive.

And the efficiency of the system of slavery in the growing of cotton is fully established by the statistics in the case. The decade from 1850 to 1860, for instance, shows as great a percentage of increase in production as any decade in the history of the country,—being, indeed, greater than nearly any other consecutive ten years. In 1859–60 the crop was 4,861,202 bales, an amount not again attained until 1878–79, eighteen years later, and thirteen years after the close of the war,

although the population had increased meanwhile nearly forty per cent. In fact, the increase in production of cotton since the war has not kept pace with the increase in population in the South; *e. g.*, in 1860 the cotton crop was 4,861,202 bales; in 1900-1, 10,383,422 bales, an increase of 113 per cent, the population of the cotton states being for the same dates respectively 7,513,000, and 18,116,000 or an increase of 140 per cent.

As a mere agency for producing cotton, I repeat, slavery was eminently efficient. Of course the mere production of raw cotton does not constitute an ideal economic state, and every one knows that the institution of slavery stifled the mechanical and scientific spirit of Southern society, and made impossible the highly organized, complex industrial life which in the New South is fast supplanting the idyllic agricultural life of the Old South.

As a result of this social revolution one of the most noteworthy changes in regard to the production of cotton since the Civil War is in the labor now employed. Mr. Carnegie in a recent utterance is pleased to ascribe the 11,000,000 bales of the annual crop to the labor of the negro. If the man on the ground may differ with the one so remote from the conditions under discussion, I should say that the amount of cotton made by negro labor grows gradually less every year. It is the universal opinion of those who should know, that as the generation trained in the school of slavery passes away, negro labor becomes, in the mass, less efficient. Moreover, large numbers of negro laborers are drawn annually from the fields to the large industrial enterprises developing so extensively in this section. Now the falling off in negro labor is made good, in part by a gradual increase in white labor, small farmers of the

tenant class with two or three plows, who are entering governmental lands, or subdividing the larger plantations. Statistics on the relative amounts grown by the two races are difficult to secure, but the generalizations made are based on close personal observations and wide inquiry.

As every one knows, this was impossible under the old order of things. With a system of slavery, agricultural labor, in fact, all manual labor was a badge of social inferiority. Moreover, there was a gradual acquisition of all desirable lands by the landed aristocracy,—the large wealthy planters—with the inevitable result of the rapid emigration of the middle and lower classes of the white population from the agricultural sections of the South. For example, up to 1860, according to census reports, a larger number of people had emigrated from South Carolina (a small and stationary community), than had moved into South Carolina from all the other states of the Union.

This change to white labor has been greatly facilitated by the introduction of a new factor in cotton culture that is worthy of note. I refer to the use of commercial fertilizers. As a rule, the lower classes of society had their holdings in the hill-country in the less productive soils, the "black belt" lands having been found best suited to the most profitable employment of slave labor on a large scale. But by the use of this new agency, vast regions once considered barren have been brought into profitable cultivation, and now really afford a more reliable and constant crop than the rich alluvial soils of the old slave plantations. In nearly every agricultural county in the South there is to be observed, on the one hand this section of fertile soils, once the heart of the old civilization, now largely abandoned by the

whites, held in tenantry by a dense negro population, full of dilapidation and ruin; while, on the other hand, there is the region of light, thin soils occupied by the small white freeholder, filled with schools, churches and good roads, and all the elements of a happy enlightened country life.

The yearly investment in commercial fertilizers is enormous, 628,000 tons valued at \$17.00 a ton being consumed in Georgia; 250,000 tons in Alabama; 325,000 in South Carolina; 350,000 in North Carolina; and 425,000 in Mississippi. The total amount of fertilizers produced in the United States in 1900 was, according to the census, 2,887,000 tons, all but 1,000,000 tons of which was used exclusively in the cotton producing states, being an investment of over \$30,000,000.

As a result of the demands for fertilizers, and, too, of the industrial growth of the South, an immense new profit has come to the producers of cotton in the sale of their seed. A few years ago a farmer's surplus seed were often regarded as a nuisance while to-day the by-products of the seed—the meal, oil and hulls, are a most valuable asset, amounting in 1900 to \$42,000,000, and in 1902, according to Mr. Edmonds of the *Manufacturer's Record*, to over \$100,000,000. After the oil is extracted, the seed loses nothing in value as a fertilizer, the meal being our richest nitrogenous material, while the hulls prove an excellent feed for cattle, or if used for fuel, the ash affords a most concentrated form of potash.

Time forbids but a bare allusion to the wonderful growth in the South of the manufacture of crude cotton into forms of finished products. Thirty years ago the capital invested in all the mills from the Potomac to the Rio Grande would not have aggregated \$3,000,000:

to-day it approximates \$175,000,000; spindles have increased from 667,000 to 7,500,000 and the South now manufactures one-half of all the cotton now consumed in the United States. Larger population, higher wages, increased purchasing power of operatives, a higher standard of life, better school facilities, and a general uplift in the community life are some of the attendant results.

And great as is the economic value, still greater is the sociological value of this new form of factory-village life. For this mill people is drawn not from foreign immigrants nor from distant states, but it is drawn from the poor native-born, white population. Now for the first time in their history, they are organized into community life and taking their first step toward civilization and enlightenment.

An important factor in the future development of the textile industry in the South, whose influence will be felt more and more each year, is the excellent system of textile schools being established throughout the Southern states. Artistic taste, the knowledge of underlying scientific principles, skill, and intelligence,—in a word, brains, are required for the full development of any industry.

The apprehension expressed in some quarters of a significant decline in the annual yield of cotton appears entirely baseless. The great diminution of the present crop seems entirely attributable to unfavorable seasons. No crop has ever been cultivated under more adverse circumstances. Furthermore, a study of the cotton record for the last fifty years discovers a frequent occurrence of violent fluctuations much more extreme than at present, the minimum limit being 150 pounds, the maximum, 225 pounds per acre,—the crop of 1860

being, for instance, twenty-five per cent less than that of 1859. One must believe that the combined scientific genius of America will eventually find a stay for the ravages of the boll weevil. Nor can there be any danger in the deterioration of seed arising from the cotton seed oil industry ; for no discrimination whatever is made either by the seller or the purchaser in the seed that are disposed of.

The question of most vital concern to-day in the production of cotton is the question of labor, both as to supply and as to intelligence. Negro labor is becoming restless, higher wages and things much more inviting than the mule and the plow are drawing him from the country regions. There is, in fact, a very keen rivalry for his services among the land owners. And how is his place to be supplied? Gradually, I have said, by the natural expansion of the white race, but still more rapidly, it seems, should the supply come from immigration. No where in the United States is there to-day a more inviting field for the small farmer than in the South.

And, above all, if we wish to regenerate our agriculture, and produce more cotton, more corn, more pork, we need more education, more intelligence. Few, indeed, are the farmers who are able to apply to cotton culture the beneficial results of labor saving machines, or the recent discoveries pertaining to their business. Knowledge, indeed, is power, and Mr. Sully's 25,000,000 bale crop will never arrive until there obtains in our general farming population a higher order of intelligence, mental alertness, and a more intimate knowledge of the great principles controlling the art of agriculture.

However, of one thing we may rest assured as stated in the beginning, the sceptre of King Cotton will not

pass from the South at any near date. Certain climatic conditions of temperature, moisture and distribution of gentle rain fall, combined with a favorable soil and, at present, a vast body of labor available for harvesting make the South the ideal region for the culture of cotton; and under the stimulating influence of the high prices now prevailing, the acreage for the approaching year will doubtless be greatly increased, and with favorable seasons it may not be rash to prophesy a crop of 12,000,000 bales.